

Homage to Richard Gelwick, 1931-2014

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ABSTRACT

This essay celebrates the life and achievements of Richard Gelwick, the man perhaps most responsible for not only recognizing the importance of the thought of Michael Polanyi, but also for communicating its significance and giving it institutional continuity.

The time has come to honor with gratitude the life and accomplishments of the man who, perhaps more than any other person, insured that the significance of the thought of Michael Polanyi would not be forgotten. Richard Gelwick died in hospice care on June 29, 2014; he was surrounded by his family. A memorial service was held on the morning of July 12 in Brunswick, Maine and was preceded by an evening celebration of Gelwick's life in his nearby hometown of Harpswell. Phil Mullins represented the Polanyi Society at these occasions.

Richard Gelwick is due commendation for many things. He early recognized the importance of Polanyi's work as setting forth a philosophy that spoke with power to personal and social ailments of late modernity. In 1962 and 1963, Gelwick collected and made available on microfilm Polanyi's scattered non-scientific writings. Based on this work, he wrote the first dissertation, the first book on Polanyi's thought, and created the first bibliography of Polanyi's non-scientific publications. The bibliography was published in Poteat and Langford's 1968 festschrift, *Intellect and Hope*. It was the tap root that nurtured the Polanyi studies of early Polanyi scholars like William T. Scott and Harry Prosch. Although other books introducing and commenting on Polanyi's thought have subsequently been published, Gelwick's *The Way of Discovery* (1977) remains an important book; it has been translated into Japanese and was republished in 2004. Gelwick played a large role in establishing the organization that eventually became the Polanyi Society. He served as the Society's General Coordinator from 1978 to 1999 and from 1978 to 1991 edited the Society's early publications that eventually became *Tradition and Discovery*. Gelwick's own creative Polanyi-based thought, articulated over the course of 50 years, amply demonstrates that he has been one of the most important interpreters of Polanyi's achievements. To better appreciate all of Gelwick's accomplishments, we review below his remarkable career.

Richard Gelwick was born on March 9, 1931 in Bristow, Oklahoma. At age 14, he had already chosen ministry as a path "to build peace in the hearts and minds of persons in the 'atomic age.'" He graduated with a B.A. from Southern Methodist College in 1952 and with a M.Div. from Yale in 1956. During an intern year in campus ministry at Temple University, Richard met his wife of 59 years, Dr. Beverly Ann Prosser Gelwick. After graduating from Yale, Gelwick served as an Assistant Professor of Religion at Washington and Lee University from 1956 to 1958. There he became involved in the civil rights movement, dissuading churches from allowing their facilities to be used as a means of escaping school desegregation. He was ordained as a Methodist minister in 1957 and transferred his ministerial standing to the United Church of Christ in 1963. From 1958 to 1960, he was Director of Religious Activities at Oberlin College. "There the challenge of holding together faith and reason, religion and science became more focal as many questioned the relevance of religious faith in 'a world come of age,' i.e., enlightened. That challenge led me to Berkeley and a doctor of theology degree at the Pacific School of Religion."²

At Yale, Gelwick heard from his primary mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr, about the importance of not getting stuck in one's own discipline. Niebuhr mentioned Polanyi as a good example of one who had creatively left his field of science and gained insights into the relation between science and religion and into social ethics. At Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, where Gelwick went to work on a Th.D., Charles McCoy, himself a Polanyi scholar, became his primary doctoral mentor. Polanyi was invited to one of McCoy's seminars in conjunction with his trip to give the McEnerney Lectures at the University of California in February, 1962 (lectures that Gelwick attended). In the seminar, Polanyi discussed his article, "Faith and Reason," and Gelwick was impressed by his evident authority in attacking those who dismissed the importance of faith in all thinking. As Mullins reports,

After the class ended, Gelwick asked Polanyi if anyone had written a book or an overview of his thought on science, faith and reason and if it would be necessary to learn Hungarian to study his philosophical thought. Polanyi said no one had yet written any such study and most of his work in this area is in English. In late spring, Gelwick approached Polanyi about doing a dissertation using Polanyi's philosophical ideas, but he discovered that Polanyi himself did not know a great deal about the scope of his own non-scientific writing. This led to the project of collecting Polanyi's non-scientific writing, a project that was possible because Polanyi was in residence at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at nearby Stanford University in the fall of 1962.³

Polanyi brought Gelwick a box of about 21 of his papers, but it was soon evident that this was but a small portion of what Polanyi had produced. Gelwick notes that "When I began my research on Polanyi's theory of knowledge and its implications for theology, I found there was almost nothing in journals or books on his social and philosophical thought or his theory of knowledge. There was no introduction to Michael Polanyi except his own writings."⁴ Meeting with Polanyi at Stanford provided Gelwick with the springboard to launch an intensive search for what Polanyi had published. The wonderful resources of the library at the University of California, Berkeley, were of immeasurable assistance to Gelwick. Eventually, he collected over 120 social, political and philosophical papers, a few never published, and got the library at the Pacific School of Religion to make a microfilm of them all. One of Gelwick's last scholarly actions was to explain to Phil Mullins his process of gathering this collection of Polanyi materials; the contents of his microfilm are now available through the Polanyi Society web site (<http://www.polanyisociety.org>).

Gelwick not only gathered Polanyi's works; he indwelt their contents and produced the first dissertation on Polanyi's theory of knowledge and its implications for Christian theology. The 1965 dissertation, "*Credere Aude: Michael Polanyi's Theory of Knowledge And Its Implications For Christian Theology*," served as a foundation for the first book on Polanyi's thought, *The Way of Discovery*, published by Oxford in 1977 and republished by Wipf and Stock in 2004. Gelwick notes that in publishing these two works, "I felt . . . like the writer of the Gospel according to Mark or any other writer being the first one to provide a biographical interpretation of a significant figure. It's a wilderness and especially with such a polymath with several careers like Michael Polanyi."⁵

After year-long stints as a lecturer at PSR and as an assistant professor at Chapman College, Gelwick became the chair of the Religion and Philosophy Program at Stephens College in Missouri from 1967 to 1988. During this period he visited Polanyi a number of times, serving as a valued consultant on various projects, including the writing of *Meaning*. While in England, he had academic assignments at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford.⁶ His career took a somewhat different turn when he later followed Beverly Gelwick to her university counseling appointment in New Hampshire: he eventually became the chair of the Department of Medical Ethics and Humanities at the College of Osteopathic Medicine at the University of New England from 1988 to 1998. After his retirement as Professor Emeritus, he taught courses at Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine. The variety of assignments at different types of in-

stitutions at which he taught, first as chaplain and then professor, suggest that he became something of a polymath himself, at least insofar as examining values from a variety of perspectives is concerned.⁷ In his passion for the social good and in his willingness to take on different sorts of assignments, Gelwick was a disciple of Polanyi, enjoying the lure and satisfaction of discovery.

In mentioning discovery, we arrive at the crux of Gelwick's understanding of Polanyi, already suggested by the title of his book. "The nature of discovery is the root idea that illuminates and motivates Polanyi's philosophy."⁸ Gelwick suggests that the most encompassing term for Polanyi's approach to philosophy is not William Scott's term, a "Gestalt philosophy," nor is it best to focus on Polanyi's terms, "tacit knowing" or "post-critical philosophy," important as those terms are. In Gelwick's view, they do not comprehensively gather up the decisive character of Polanyi's thought, nor do they suggest the range of its implications. Gelwick's candidate to designate the full range of Polanyi's thought is that it is "a heuristic philosophy," one dedicated to the increase of knowledge.⁹

Gelwick's interpretation of the comprehensive sweep of Polanyi's thought can be seen as a variation on the theme of "the one and the many." All thinking is carried out within the one structure of tacit knowing: subsidiaries bearing on a focal target. However, there are "many ways of knowing reality and many levels to our understanding of it. These differences make for a variety of studies and investigations."¹⁰ One of the important existential differences between scientific knowing and knowing in art, religion, and morality is that the latter "carry us away" to a degree not found in scientific knowing. Knowing in art and religion involves a deeper—or at least a different—kind of participation. It is clear that Polanyi understands science, art, and religion to be aspects of reality, but what has become an ongoing point of contention within the community of Polanyi interpreters is how best to understand the ontological nature of these realities. In a review of *The Way of Discovery*, Harry Prosch contended that Polanyi distinguishes the independent ontological status of science from the imagination-based status of religion and theology. Gelwick protested in an AAR Consultation in 1980 that Prosch thereby undermines one of Polanyi's signal contributions, his demonstration that our knowledge in both science and religion is of independent realities which we approach through faith. "The consequence of Prosch's view is extremely serious. It would mean that, while Polanyi restored the role of faith in all knowing, he had done it only to believe in God as a figment in our imagination."¹¹ Prosch replies that both science and religion "fit Polanyi's often expressed definition of reality as that from which we expect indeterminate properties to arise in the future, properties of which we have not yet dreamed. These properties have, as it were, a life and development of their own which we can neither control nor anticipate; they are not products of our subjective whims or fancies."¹² From the time of his earliest reflections, Polanyi understood the power of ideas in society. What seems at stake in the Gelwick-Prosch debate as expressed in the *Zygon* articles is what ontological status of referents is required to grant ideas authentic moral power.

In some of his later theological reflection, Gelwick seems closer to Prosch's point of view, as he suggests he does not believe in a supernatural God or the effectiveness of intercessory prayer.¹³ This seems to leave room for Gelwick to understand God as a culturally grounded, independent form of being, understood through imagination, a notion comparable to such other aspects of Polanyi's firmament of values as truth, goodness, and beauty. In this regard, Gelwick follows Polanyi, who writes, "God cannot be observed, any more than truth or beauty can be observed. He exists in the sense that He is to be worshipped and obeyed, but not otherwise; not as a fact—any more than truth, beauty or justice exist as facts."¹⁴

Gelwick contends that Polanyi's heuristic philosophy is dynamic so that one can never rest assured that one has found final answers. For the "commitments that form our explorations are diverse. A society of explorers is not just a society of theists. It is a society of seekers of truth. . . Reality as Polanyi saw it needs the contributions of all as we approach the reality that always exceeds our final grasp."¹⁵ Although Gelwick affirms the importance of many perspectives as avenues for increasing knowledge, he is most

comfortable writing from a theological point of view that seeks to overcome division and divisiveness. “When all religions are seen as all involving faith as a form of relying on and attending to in tacit knowing, we provide common ground for meeting differences. Instead of looking first at what teachings are believed, the structure of tacit knowing suggests that we look at how we each came to those beliefs on which we rely.”¹⁶ As his accompanying article displays in more detail, he wants to show that tacit knowing is an expression of faith. Gelwick suggests that it is important to understand the development of Polanyi’s perspective, moving from his early epistemologically-oriented books to his mature epistemological books, *The Tacit Dimension* and *Meaning*, which expand further tacit knowing’s fundamental role in all natural and cultural life.

Let us finally note again that Richard Gelwick was an institution builder who understood that to promote interest in Michael Polanyi’s thought required joining with others to create an organization that promoted scholarship and teaching. In the early seventies, he was involved in the conferences and programs that eventually led to the establishment of the Polanyi Society. Gelwick served as the chief officer of the Society for an incredible 21 years. He edited not only the regular publications of the Society for many years, but also, when nobody else rose to the occasion, the 900 pages of proceedings from the 1991 Kent State Polanyi Conference, which was published as *From Polanyi to the 21st Century*. He served as one of the Society’s primary links in the sixties, seventies and eighties with the British Polanyi group, Convivium, and, in the early nineties, with the Hungarian Polanyi group, the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association. He was integral to the process of reorganizing the Society in the late nineties as an official non-profit group and he had a hand in recruiting many of those who have served on the Polanyi Society Board of Directors in the last 14 years.

Richard Gelwick appreciated Polanyi’s affirmation of the Pauline scheme of redemption, and indeed his faith in the significance of Polanyi’s philosophy and his consequent expression of that significance can be seen as a Pauline act of grace that has benefitted all of us. It is not clear what degree of recognition would be accorded Polanyi now without Gelwick’s pioneering work. Gelwick himself is to be honored not just for that work; he will be fondly remembered as a good man of passion and grace, of enthusiasm and support, a friend to many. In honor of what his life represents, the University of Houston Hobby Center for Public Policy is setting up an endowed annual lecture on ethics and public policy named the Richard L. Gelwick Lecture. Anyone interested in making a tax deductible donation to this new program can send a check to Ellen Happe Phillips at the following address:

The University of Houston Hobby Center for Public Policy
Dr. Richard Lee Gelwick Endowment
c/o Ellen Happe Phillips,
Chief Advancement Officer
University of Houston
402 Agnes Arnold Hall, Rm 644 AH
Houston, TX 77204

Donations honoring Gelwick’s many achievements can, of course, also be made in Gelwick’s name to the Polanyi Society. At the upcoming November 2014 meeting of the Polanyi Society Board of Directors there will be discussion of establishing the Gelwick Scholarship for Young Scholars.

In conclusion, Gelwick’s part in the vast saga of unfolding existence is nicely suggested by his eloquent recounting of Polanyi’s vision of anthropogenesis:

Polanyi’s work had provided a significant way of seeing that the structure of tacit knowing provided for science and religion a coherent way of understanding life from matter to energy, living cells, primitive forms of purposive activity, and finally to the

human person. This understanding saw in Polanyi at least two renewing philosophical principles for theology. One was the fiduciary basis of all knowing that recovered a common ground for scientific and theological dialogue. The other was the calling of the person and society to seek the truth, explore the universe with its potential meanings, and state their findings. In both of these philosophical reformations, Polanyi was reopening a panorama of inquiry and of achievement of meanings closed down by the influence of the objectivist ideal of knowing.¹⁷

Thank you, Richard, for the role you played in the cosmic drama.

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Gelwick, email to Phil Mullins and Martin Moleski, sent June 6, 2008, p. 1.

²Ibid.

³Phil Mullins, "An Introduction to the Gelwick Microfilm," Section B, on-line at the Polanyi Society web site, (<https://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/essays.htm>).

⁴Gelwick, quoted in "Introduction," Section B.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Beside working with Polanyi himself, my work with him led to a year with Arthur Peacock, biochemist and theologian at Oxford and Cambridge and T. F. Torrance at Edinburgh, student of Barth and Einstein" (Gelwick, email to Mullins and Moleski, June 6, 2008, p. 2).

⁷"While I have taught at 9 institutions including undergraduate, seminary and medical school, each has allowed me to sustain attention to the way knowing shapes our relation to the world" (Gelwick, Ibid., pp. 1-2).

⁸Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 84.

⁹Ibid. Elsewhere, Gelwick observes, "Everyone admires discovery, yet few have studied it, and almost no one has seen in it the organizing point for a whole view of the world. Such a view is developed by Polanyi" (*Discovery*, xii).

¹⁰Gelwick, *Discovery*, 100.

¹¹Richard Gelwick, "Science and Reality, Religion and God: A Reply to Harry Prosch," *Zygon* 17/1 (March 1982): 24.

¹²Harry Prosch, "Polanyi's View of Religion in *Personal Knowledge*: A Response to Richard Gelwick," *Zygon* 17/1 (March, 1982): 41.

¹³See Richard Gelwick, "Michael Polanyi's Search for Truth: Michael Polanyi's Daring Epistemology and the Hunger for Teleology," *Zygon* 40/1 (March 2005): 75, n. 5. This point is also made in Gelwick's final essay, published in this issue of *Tradition and Discovery*, starting on the next page.

¹⁴Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 279.

¹⁵Gelwick, "Polanyi's Search for Truth," 72.

¹⁶Richard Gelwick, "Notes toward Understanding the Hungarian Roots of Polanyi's Heuristic Philosophy of Religion," *Tradition and Discovery* 32/3 (2005-2006): 32.

¹⁷Gelwick, "Polanyi's Search for Truth," 64.